

Learning Together

Successful teaching in combined grades

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This curriculum insert is excerpted from *Learning Together, A Teacher's Guide to Combined Grades*. This new ETFO resource responds to the needs of members teaching split grades. The resource offers seven strategies for success and related practical supporting materials. One of them is presented here.



Creating an inclusive learning community in your classroom

When students come to a place where their ideas are valued, they are motivated to take risks and take responsibility for their own learning. When students are valued and encouraged to learn from one another they can work together and become critical thinkers, problem-solvers and ultimately become life-long learners.

The combined grade classroom is rooted in a learning community that includes everyone. It is an environment that combines rather than splits, is flexible rather than rigid, and values individual student learning more than lock-step, grade-specific content.

In an inclusive learning community, students are

- included and genuinely appreciated by both teacher and peers
- respected and celebrated for their diversity and differences
- valued for demonstrating good character and citizenship both in and out of the classroom
- actively involved in their own and others' learning
- motivated to succeed in a secure environment that thrives on positive reinforcement.

Build group norms: the big idea for all grades

At the beginning of the year establish group norms for the class so that every child will be comfortable and feel that he or she has something to contribute to the group.

Begin the discussion with two key questions:

- What do you need to feel comfortable in the classroom?
- What do you need to learn best?

Often during discussion, comments about small things such as desks and chairs being comfortable will arise. Then the students usually move on to more abstract ideas ... Note those comments that you can build on to establish group norms and build a community of learners. At the end of the session you might have list that looks like this:

- No put-downs, appreciation only
 - Respect yourself, others, and things in the classroom
 - Participate actively in the learning
 - Respect a student's right to 'pass' if he or she is uncomfortable
 - Listen actively to the teacher and to your classmates.
- (Gibbs, 2006)

Decide what the learning community looks like

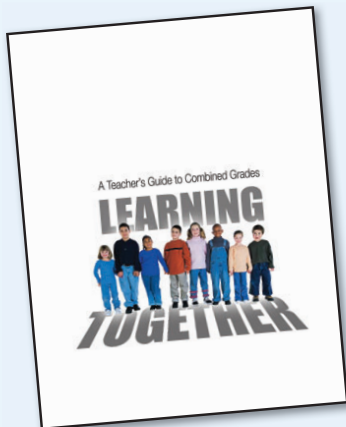
Use this discussion to build a classroom learning community which looks like this:

- Desks arranged in flexible, co-operative groups
- An established whole group meeting area
- Classroom-generated expectations that are clearly posted in the room
- Active participation and listening during whole and small group activities
- Students working together to achieve goals
- Teacher conferencing with students, both formally and informally, on a regular basis
- Classroom meetings to address situations where students feel uncomfortable or unsafe in the classroom.

Decide what the learning community sounds like

Use this discussion to build a classroom learning community which sounds like this:

- Positive dialogue and praise during student-student and student-teacher interactions
- Students using 'I' statements to share their feelings about a situation (i.e. "I feel like ...when ...")
- Taking turns without interruptions
- Positive comments like: *I like the way you...* and *I am wondering if...*



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You can order the book from shopETF0 by going to shopetfo.etfo.ca → Publications.

CONSIDER

USE REFERENCE CHARTS

The combined grade teacher uses reference charts effectively to support the inclusive learning community. These reference charts are best created with the students during discussion.

The teacher writes the students' ideas as they discuss how they will develop their inclusive learning community.

During the discussion the teacher challenges the students to think of ways they can meet their goals. In a successful learning community, values are shared. Beliefs are common and expectations are clearly understood.

Charts like these, which have been co-operatively created, serve as reminders of the goals the class has set for itself.

What is a Friend?

A friend ...

- *is kind.*
- *is helpful.*
- *will work together to make things and accomplish things.*
- *is positive and shows appreciation.*
- *is flexible.*
- *doesn't use put-downs.*
- *makes us happy.*
- *does nice things for one another.*
- *plays with you.*
- *has a positive attitude, not negative.*
- *is always nice.*
- *stands up for you — using words, not actions.*
- *listens when you speak.*
- *is trustworthy with your secrets, your feelings and your things.*
- *tells the truth.*
- *is always honest.*
- *shares and cheers you up.*
- *makes you laugh.*
- *includes others.*
- *gives people chances and accepts them.*
- *takes turns deciding what to play.*

CHECKLIST

PRIMARY

Create a Sense of Belonging

Classroom Setup

- Desks or tables arranged for groups of 4-6 students to encourage co-operative learning and team-building.
- Easy access to all classroom materials and bins to promote increased independence.
- 10 by 12 carpet for classroom meeting area, strategically placed near bulletin boards and shelves to display student examples and performance standards.
- 1 or 2 round tables, easily accessible to instructional materials, with 4-6 chairs to use for teacher guided practice.

Gathering Student Information

- Parent feedback forms, student interest surveys. Use facial expression pictures for early primary students to share their feelings about a series of questions and/or statements.
- Use multiple intelligences inventories, observations, and anecdotal notes.
- Collect student work samples in a portfolio.
- Collate all of this data onto a class profile sheet that can be inserted and regularly updated in your daybook.

Planning and Programming

- Place a strong emphasis team building, collaboration and working together.
- Establish simple, clear classroom norms and expectations (i.e., active participation, no put-downs, listening, respect).
- Expect every student to do their part to contribute to the classroom community.
- Model and reinforce classroom expectations, particularly during the first month.
- Conduct classroom meetings on the carpet to address common classroom problems or concerns.



Our Grade 5/6 Agreement

1. *We will respect our classroom community and ourselves.*
2. *We will concentrate on listening with our eyes, our brains, and our hearts.*
3. *We will appreciate smiles and kind words.*
4. *We will respect other people's feelings.*
5. *We have the right to pass if we feel uncomfortable.*



INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

— Lesson Plan Sample

Instructional Focus:

To establish classroom rules and routines that support learning

Introduction of Group Goals:

In advance of the lesson, identify some general categories of rules that would support positive interdependence in the classroom. Intend on making the rules up at the beginning of the year, with student input, and then together you can reinforce throughout the year.

Whole Group:

Students brainstorm rules that would help us all to learn together this year. The teacher records each separate idea on a separate post-it. Students popcorn their ideas. Generate as long a list as possible, without making any judgments or suggestions at this time.

Teacher sticks the post-its on chart paper. Once all of the ideas are recorded, students, with teacher's assistance, clump all of the like rules together.

Try to narrow the clusters down to 5 at the most.

Small Group:

Using numbered heads, divide the students into groups of four. Give each group one cluster of post-its, and challenge them to create one short and succinct rule from their cluster.

Partners:

Again using numbered heads, have students within their groups of four break into pairs and together with their partner, have them discuss the rule that the group created to make sure that the rule is reasonable and can be applied consistently.

Discussion/Reflection:

Come back together as a whole group and have each group present their rule. Create a class chart of the new class rules.

